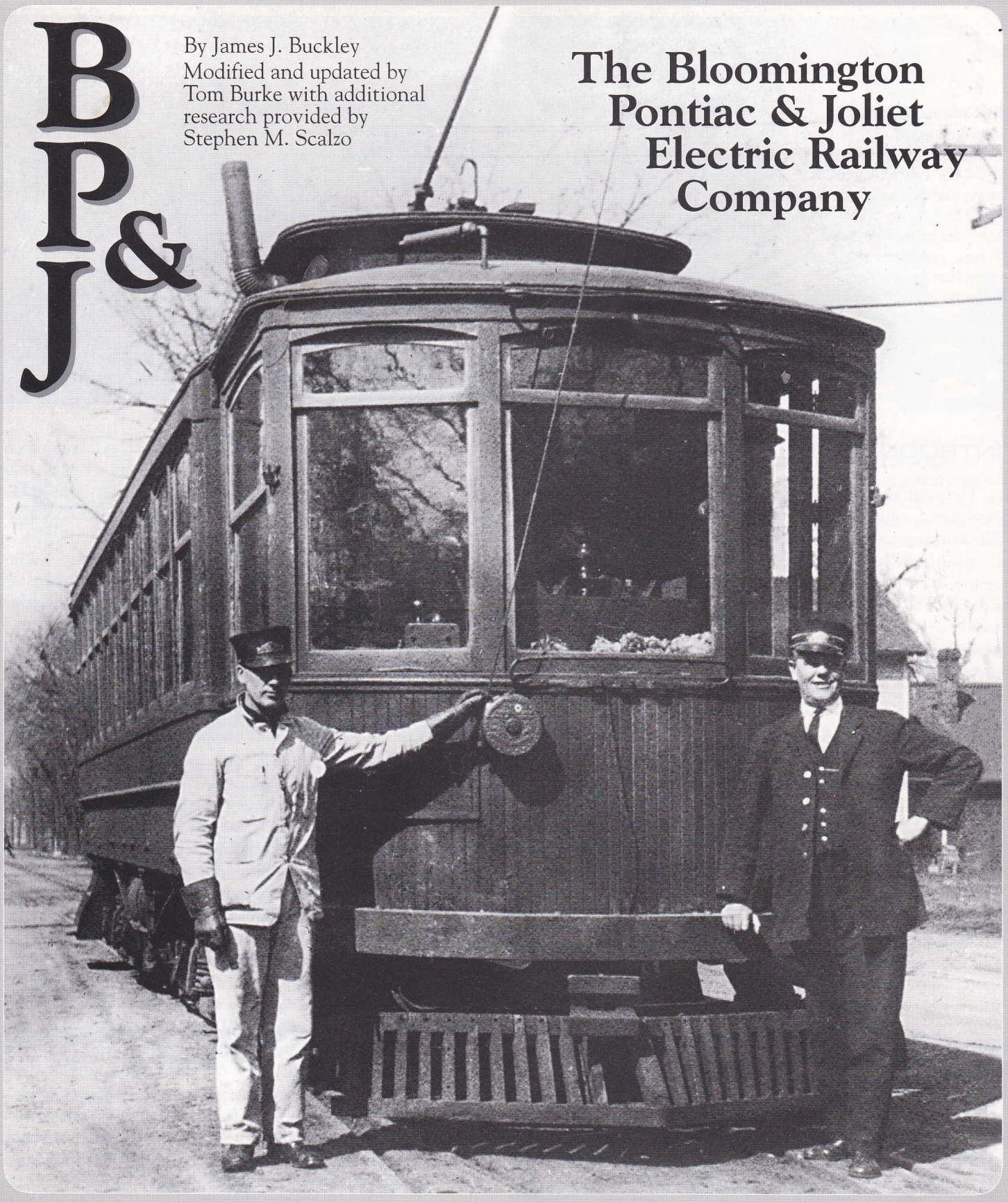
BP&J

The Bloomington Pontiac & Joliet Electric Railway Company

By James J. Buckley
Modified and updated by Tom Burke with additional research provided by Stephen M. Scalzo



▲ *The crew of the "Pontiac," later car 202, posed in what we believe is Aurora Street near the carbarn in Pontiac. We believe that the motorman is A. W. Lehmann. The conductor is not identified.*—Frank E. Butts Collection from Stephen M. Scalzo.

If the ultimate visions and dreams had been realized the Bloomington, Pontiac & Joliet Electric Railway Company (BP&J) would have been part of the interurban system extending from Chicago to St. Louis.

▶ *Construction of the BP&J commenced in 1904 and continued over the winter of 1904-05. We believe that this photo was taken in February 1905 looking north along the west side of Aurora Street in Pontiac just before the tracks turned northeast to parallel the Chicago & Alton tracks to Dwight.*—Pontiac Historical Society from Tom Burke

INTRODUCTION

The original promoters of the BP&J, businessmen in Pontiac, envisioned a line connecting Pontiac with the larger cities of Bloomington and Joliet. Located mainly in Livingston County, Illinois, the BP&J never made it to either Bloomington or Joliet. It connected the city of Pontiac with the towns of Odell and Dwight, a distance of 20 miles from end to end. Of the interurban railways within a 100-mile radius of Chicago, the BP&J was among the earliest to be abandoned. The lifespan of the BP&J was relatively short, lasting only from 1905 to 1925; but this interurban was fondly remembered by those who grew up alongside it and recorded their recollections.

The BP&J featured an unusual diversity of equipment and service for such a small line. Its rolling stock included then–state-of-the art interurban cars, an elderly streetcar for city service, second-hand trailers, a freight motor for both carload and less-than-carload services, rented and borrowed cars from other lines, and even a steam locomotive that provided back-up in at least one instance.

Its colorful history followed the typical pattern of so many Midwestern interurban railways of the early 20th century — big and unrealized ambitions of the owners and boosters. In 1907 the Fisher syndicate had a grandiose plan for an interurban system from Chicago to St. Louis. The Fishers, whose company constructed interurbans, envisioned extending the BP&J to Bloomington and Joliet, respectively. In Joliet there would be a connection with a planned interurban line from the Chicago area and in Bloomington there would be a connection with the Illinois Traction System that reached St. Louis via Decatur and Springfield. The only thing that came from this plan was grading and a few bridges between Pontiac and Chenoa.

The eventual acquisition of the BP&J by Samuel Insull's utilities empire, and mounting operating losses from ever-increasing automobile and truck competition, forced the BP&J's inevitable abandonment. Yet the BP&J contributed greatly to the social and business lives of the communities it served during its brief existence and was a source of pride and entertainment during a simpler time. It also offered more frequent service than the competing Chicago & Alton steam railroad line.

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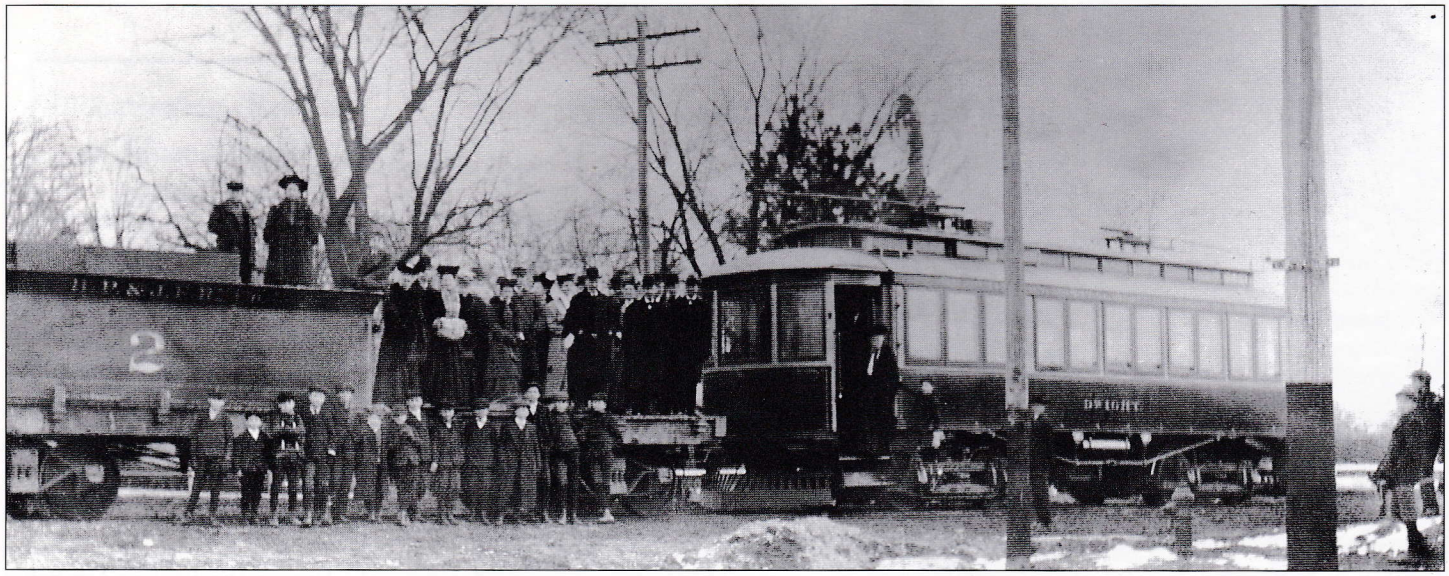
PONTIAC, ODELL & DWIGHT

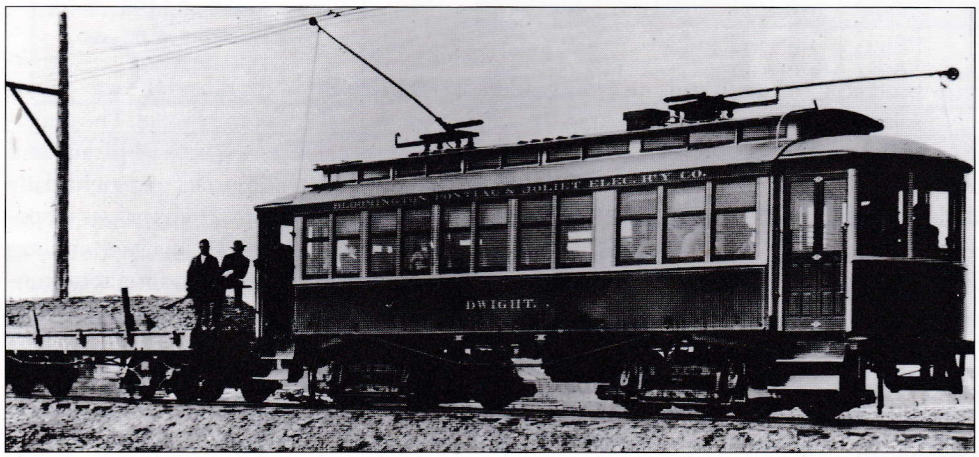
The BP&J perhaps should have been named the Pontiac, Odell & Dwight since it mainly served those communities. Pontiac, named for the famous Ottawa Indiana chief, is the county seat of Livingston County and is located on the fertile plains of central Illinois along the Vermillion River. First settled around 1830, the town was platted in 1837 and a post office was established in 1838. It was incorporated as a village in 1856 and reincorporated as a city in 1872.

A state reformatory was built at Pontiac in 1871 that continues to house inmates in 2004 as the Pontiac Correctional Center. The city was mostly a business and commercial center, never very big, with a population of just 4,890 in 1910 and 5,264 in 1920. Most of the largest industry was located on the Illinois Central Railroad on the north side of town, including the Spartan Foundry and two shoe companies. Grain elevators were located on both the Wabash and the Chicago & Alton.

The Pontiac Street Railway Company was organized in March 1893 with stated capital of $100,000, and Pontiac Transit was organized in June 1895 also with stated capital of $100,000. However, neither of these companies did anything beyond incorporation.

The tiny hamlet of Cayuga, listed on the BP&J timetable, consisted of a grain elevator, a school, and a couple of houses, pointing to the low population density in the territory served by the line. Up the tracks was the community of Odell, named for William H. Odell the landowner, was platted in 1856 and was the location of a brick and tile works that was established in 1886. Odell's first





▲ *Steam engine number 2 was used in the construction of the line and retained for work train service for a short period after the line was opened. The presence of the car "Dwight" would indicate that this is a celebration for opening a segment of the line in 1905.*—Krambles-Peterson Archive

◀ *The "Dwight" was also pressed into work service most likely before the line opened for revenue service.*—Paul Stringham Collection from Stephen M. Scalzo

residents were Chicago & Alton employees who tended the station and water tank and maintained the tracks.

At the northern end of the BP&J was the town of Dwight, named after Henry C. Dwight, a New York financier who was one of the backers of the Chicago & Mississippi, a predecessor of the Chicago & Alton. Dwight was platted in 1853 and its first residents were railroad employees who tended the station and water tank. Dwight was also home to the Boys' Reformatory that is in still use in 2004 as a prison facility for women. R. R. Donnelley is another major employer with a large printing facility in Dwight

Corporate Organization and Construction of the BP&J

The Bloomington, Pontiac & Joliet Electric Railway Company was chartered on December 20, 1902, under the laws of the State of Illinois. The stated capital was $100,000, and the line was built with local capital. The BP&J was promoted principally by a group of Pontiac men led by J.A. Carothers, the president of the Pontiac Light & Water Company. The intention was to operate an interurban line from Bloomington, the county seat of McLean County, through Pontiac and Dwight to Joliet, the county seat of Will County. Connections would be made in Bloomington with the Illinois Traction System and in Joliet, through connections would be made, with the street railway and interurban systems surrounding Chicago. The designers planned to achieve substantial savings by using the then-novel high-voltage, single-phase alternating current system. This system would substantially reduce the requirement for electric substations that are needed at close intervals to distribute power in a direct current system.

Construction and engineering work began in 1904 under the direction of Bion J. Arnold and the Arnold Engineering Company of Chicago. The route paralleled the Chicago & Alton Railroad for its entire length, except in towns where city streets were traversed in Pontiac, Odell, and Dwight. The line was single track with only a few sidings and turnouts. For the most part the territory was flat, which meant maximum grades of only 1 percent. The 70-pound rails were of ASCE standard section. The foundations for all bridges were constructed of cement, and the girder work was of steel. All culverts less than 24 inches in diameter were tile, with larger ones made of concrete and steel, including the ones over the Mackinaw and Vermillion rivers. This high-quality construction was unusual for interurban railways of that era and means that much of these structures remain in place today.

In contrast, the overhead catenary system featured a simple design by Arnold. At first, the catenary consisted of double wires running parallel, one used for northbound and the other for southbound movements, both for power and as feeders. This system was one of the first 3,300-volt, single-phase, 25-cycle General Electric alternating current systems. It was similar to one used on the Ballston Division of the Schenectady Railway Company in New York state, and it was widely publicized at the time of its construction as being

◀ *The first car to arrive at the courthouse square was the "Dwight," which "clanked down Main Street" on Easter Sunday, April 23, 1905. Operations from the north edge of Pontiac to Odell had commenced on March 15, 1905. The "Dwight" is on Main Street just short of Washington Street.*—Krambles-Peterson Archive

▶ *BP&J schedule*—Pontiac Historical Society from Tom Burke

a pioneer installation. GE installed a 25-cycle generator in the Pontiac Light & Power Company's facility. No substations were necessary because the end of track in Dwight was approximately 19 miles away. However, this method was later changed with dedicated wires for either power or feeder use. Wooden poles were used except in Pontiac where they were constructed of iron.

The general offices of the BP&J were located at 221 W. Washington St. in Pontiac, while the car barn was on the northeast edge of town near the three steam railroads, the old Spartan Foundry, the McMurray Canning Company, and an old coal mine.

Passenger Service Begins

The route in Pontiac was from the county courthouse downtown, north via Washington, Main, Wabash, and Aurora streets. There was considerable difficulty in crossing both the Wabash and the Illinois Central tracks at the edge of town. The BP&J's first car, the "Dwight," was put in service on March 15, 1905, on the segment from the Illinois Central on the north edge of Pontiac north to Odell. Passengers were transferred in a free bus to and from the courthouse in Pontiac, a distance of about one mile.

Considering this inconvenience, the road was doing well. The BP&J carried more than 100 people on the first day and an average of more than 200 passengers daily during the next 10 days. The interurban transported 323 passengers on Saturday, March 25 and 551 passengers the next day. On Easter Sunday, April 23, 1905, the "Dwight" "clanked down Main Street and arrived, for the first time, at the courthouse square in downtown Pontiac.

The problem at the Wabash Railroad crossing was solved when Pontiac annexed the right-of-way and platted it as Wabash Avenue, making sure that the interurban line had access across the railroad.

At that time, however, the Illinois Central was outside city limits so annexation was not an option. On April 19, 1905, the Illinois Railroad and Warehouse Commission issued anorder in favor of the BP&J. The Illinois Central tracks were to be raised four feet, allowing the BP&J to pass underneath with further digging. The steam railroad had to pay the cost of raising its grade, while the electric line paid the rest of the costs. All the injunction and condemnation suits in the courts were then dismissed. A "temporary" crossing was installed, and the first BP&J car ran all the way downtown on April 27, 1905 to the enjoyment of the people. The underpass was never built, and the temporary crossing became permanent.

Odell was 10.4 miles from downtown Pontiac, and eight daily trips were made between 7 a.m. and 7:45 p.m. Each car was scheduled to reach Nolan's Crossing in 13 minutes, Cayuga 4 minutes after that, and then Odell in another 13 minutes, for a total running time of a half hour — a big improvement over both horse-drawn transportation and the infrequent passenger service on the competing Chicago & Alton line that paralleled the BP&J.

Construction was pushed northeast to Dwight, but disaster struck just before the extension was due to open. On Thursday morning, January 25, 1906, the crankshaft and flywheel broke apart at the powerhouse, shutting down the line. For several days the line had been under heavy strain because of extraordinary loads caused by recent sleet storms. Ice and sleet were blamed for numerous short circuits at the powerhouse. Without any warning, the crankshaft on the 500-horsepower engine snapped, allowing the flywheel to twist in such a manner that it flew into pieces. The plant was the only source of power for the city, so nobody had any electricity — including the railroad. More than $5,000 in damage was done to the equipment and building, which was located on the Vermillion River in Pontiac.

General Manager Fred Lucas got a lucky break. Westinghouse had an identical engine in stock at its main plant in Pittsburgh. Service was restored on Saturday, February 17, 1906. The first car ran through to Dwight, terminating in front of George Flager's store. A special car was run in the morning for leading citizens and other invited guests. The car "Dwight" left Pontiac at 8:30 a.m. and arrived at 9:45 a.m. in Dwight. All along the line people welcomed the car. The road still owned a steam locomotive that was used in construction and during the shutdown to ballast the line. The car "Dwight" was eventually joined by a sister car, the "Pontiac." These two cars would be the main workhorses for the BP&J throughout its history.

In Dwight, cars were run downtown on East Main Street to Franklin Street beginning on Saturday, June 30, 1906. After crossing the Illinois Central on the edge of Pontiac, the BP&J's right-of-way paralleled the Chicago & Alton' right-of-way on its east

Bloomington, Pontiac & Joliet Electric Railway Co.

OFFICIAL TIME TABLE

October 1923

A. B. SELLS, Superintendent
Office 221 W. Washington Street
PONTIAC, ILL.

NORTH BOUND

Daily Except Sunday

	A.M.	A.M.	A.M.	P.M.	P.M.	P.M.	P.M.
Lv. Reformatory	6:00	8:15	10:15	12:30	3:15	5:15	7:15
Pontiac	6:05	8:20	10:20	12:35	3:20	5:20	7:20
Nolan	6:18	8:33	10:33	12:48	3:33	5:33	7:33
Cayuga	6:26	8:38	10:38	12:53	3:38	5:38	7:38
Interurban Park	6:31	8:43	10:43	12:58	3:43	5:43	7:43
Odell	6:40	8:50	10:50	1:05	3:50	5:50	7:51
Virden	6:46	8:57	10:57	1:12	3:57	5:57	7:57
Riley's	6:56	9:04	11:04	1:19	4:04	6:04	8:04
Ar. Dwight	7:10	9:15	11:15	1:30	4:15	6:15	8:15

SOUTH BOUND

Daily Except Sunday

	A.M.	A.M.	A.M.	P.M.	P.M.	P.M.	P.M.
Lv. Dwight	7:10	9:15	11:15	2:15	4:15	6:15	8:30
Riley's	7:20	9:25	11:25	2:25	4:25	6:25	8:40
Virden	7:28	9:32	11:32	2:32	4:32	6:32	8:47
Odell	7:34	9:40	11:40	2:40	4:40	6:40	8:55
Interurban Park	7:41	9:46	11:46	2:46	4:46	6:46	9:01
Cayuga	7:47	9:52	11:52	2:52	4:52	6:52	9:07
Nolan	7:53	9:57	11:57	2:57	4:57	6:57	9:13
Pontiac	8:10	10:10	12:10	3:10	5:10	7:10	9:25
Ar. Reformatory	8:15	10:15	12:15	3:15	5:15	7:15	9:30

side. In Cayuga it deviated slightly, going down what was supposed to be a short street, but in fact was essentially an unimproved private right-of-way. In Odell, Front Street was used. South of Dwight the BP&J turned away from the Chicago & Alton, going east and northeast to Columbus Street, along Columbus to Chippewa Street, then over onto Main (East) Street, and finally up to Franklin Street in the heart of the business district. The cars ran about every two hours, making eight daily trips per day between the hours of approximately 5:30am to 1:30 am the following day, with a running time of one hour Between Pontiac and Dwight. The scheduled was so arranged that one car could maintain the service.

Effective June 1, 1906, Lucas resigned as general manager of the BP&J and the power company to take a similar position in Joplin, Mo. His replacement was James H. Hesson.

Interurban Park

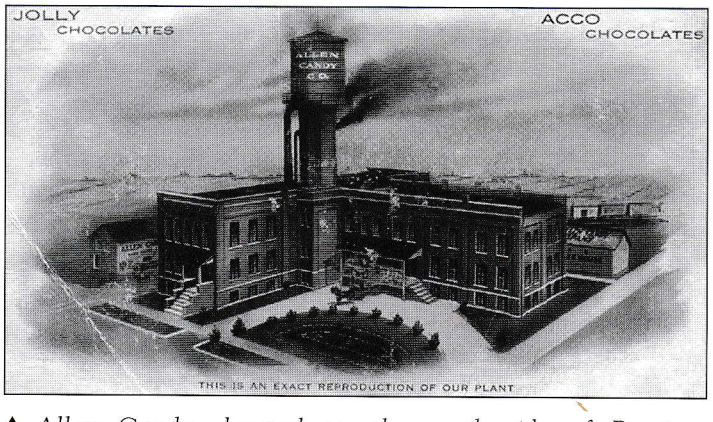
Around 1907 the BP&J built its own park, as was common with interurban railways of the day, to generate a destination for additional passenger traffic. This park, owned by BP&J cofounder John Murphy, was named, appropriately, Interurban Park and was located on a grassy knoll south of Odell close enough to Cayuga that the popular dance pavilion overlooked the "Cayuga cut" for the adjoining railroad tracks. A baseball diamond with a big bleacher with a built-in pop concession and dressing rooms on the first level made the park the place to be during the long summer nights. Those interested in less activity could sit at the picnic tables or on the swings under big shade trees. The Allen Candy Co. of Pontiac sent candy and ice cream on the BP&J for enjoyment at Interurban Park. Chautauqua gatherings also were held at the park.

To compete with the BP&J, the parallel Chicago & Alton tried to keep the local business that it previously monopolized by putting on its own "interurban" car, actually a gas electric car that was built in the Bloomington shops. This service was eventually dropped, and the towns continued to be serviced by regular steam trains.

Electric Freight on the BP&J

The BP&J interurban handled small volumes of carload freight for at least two Pontiac industries: the Allen Candy Co. and the McMurray Canning Co. factory, a canner of locally grown corn. Allen Candy made candy and ice cream and was located at the corner of Wabash and Walnut streets, while the McMurray site was on North Aurora Street north of Allen Candy. Highway construction also added some short-term income in 1924 for inbound materials needed to pave the future U.S. Route 66. Public Utility Commission records show a small switching income for the BP&J from these carload movements using a freight motor acquired in late 1907.

According to Hubert "Ruby" Boswell of Pontiac who grew up with the BP&J, the interurban delivered and picked up coal, sugar, salt, and empty cans to service these two plants. The McMurray corn-canning factory had a siding for receiving inbound carloads of coal from the BP&J. It eventually went out of business in the 1940s. Allen Candy is also gone, and much of the site is a vacant



▲ *Allen Candy, located on the north side of Pontiac, was one of the principal freight customers of the BP&J. The company is no longer in existence.*—Pontiac Historical Society from Tom Burke

lot today. This company is fondly remembered by the older residents of Pontiac who can still recall the women workers inside tossing candy out the window to school children walking past.

The BP&J carried less-than-carload freight consisting of candy and ice cream to both Interurban Park near Odell and the popular Chautauqua gatherings on the Vermillion River in Pontiac. The railroad generated other revenue by carrying bags of mail under a contract with the postal service. Salesmen would ride the cars and take orders for Allen Company ice cream and candy. Other less-than-carload freight included milk and general merchandise.

The only freight car owned by the BP&J was a flatcar used for maintenance-of-way work. A photo from that era shows the car "Dwight" hauling the flatcar. The occasional carload interchange was apparently with the Illinois Central in Pontiac as shown in plats.

Accidents on the BP&J

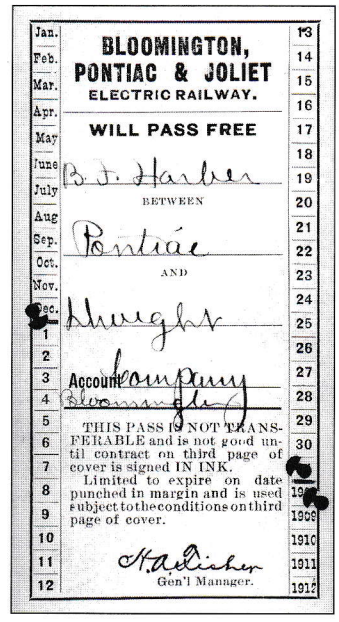
On Sunday evening, August 4, 1907, the BP&J experienced one of the worst railroad wrecks in the history of Livingston County. At 5:30 p.m. two cars left Interurban Park for Pontiac crowded with people who had attended a ballgame between Dwight and its rival Pontiac. It was against the rules for passengers to ride in the front vestibule with the motorman, but an exception was apparently made on this occasion to handle the large crowd of baseball fans.

The lead car made a stop at a crossing about a mile south of Odell, but the second car failed to stop and ran into the back of the first car. Four people were killed, and a dozen others injured. General Manager Hesson was the motorman of the second car, and he was severely injured in the wreck. Hesson claimed the brakes had failed, but the coroner's inquest determined that Hesson was following the lead car too closely, leaving him unable to stop in time.

Both cars had vestibule damage and could be repaired, but were taken out of service. Since the BP&J had a pouch mail contract with the post office, the Sunday run was made with the steam locomotive, which was called upon to "pinch hit." On Monday, an automobile was used. Service resumed on Tuesday afternoon, August 7, 1907, using a car rented from the Illinois Traction System until cars "Dwight" and "Pontiac" could be repaired.

Ownership Change and Expansion Plans

During November 1907, the BP&J was sold to the Fisher traction syndicate, which had built and financed the Joliet, Plainfield & Aurora, the predecessor of the Joliet & Southern Traction Company. Fisher Construction Company had constructed many lines in the Columbus, Ohio area including the Columbus, Delaware & Marion and the Columbus, London and Springfield, which ultimately became a part of the Ohio Electric system and the Cincinnati & Lake Erie Railroad. The Joliet & Southern, while under the control of the Fisher syndicate constructed the line from Joliet via New Lenox and Frankfort to Chicago Heights. The Fisher syndicate looked upon the BP&J as an opportunity to construct proposed lines southwest from Pontiac to Bloomington and northeast from Dwight to Joliet as a part of its plan to create an interurban line between Chicago and St. Louis. The Fisher's master plan was to build an interurban line from the end of Chicago's Lake Street elevated in Oak Park to Joliet and use the expanded BP&J to connect with Fisher controlled lines in Joliet and the Illinois Traction System in Bloomington. In December 1909, a holding company — the Chicago, Joliet & St. Louis Electric Railway — was organized. It controlled the Joliet & Southern and BP&J as well as a construction company known as the Chicago, Joliet & Central Illinois Railroad, which would construct the line from Oak Park to Joliet. The interest of the Fisher syndicate was clearly construction.



◀▲*Free passes.*—McLean County Historical Society/ Stephen M. Scalzo Collection

The Fisher syndicate decided that the first expansion of the line should be south to Bloomington. At a public meeting held in Chenoa, 10 miles south of Pontiac, Fred E. Fisher, who left his duties as the manager of the Chicago & Joliet Electric to pursue the construction of the line from Joliet to Aurora explained to those present that the extension of the BP&J down to Bloomington and up to Joliet would be conditional upon townspeople located along the new routes subscribing for a certain percentage of the bonds of the company. Fisher stated that the time had passed when outside capital would come in, build the lines, and take all the risk. He said it was customary for people along a proposed route to take 25 percent to 40 percent of the new stock or bonds. He estimated that this extension would cost $25,000 per mile. The proposed capitalization of the road from Chenoa to Joliet alone added up to $2.5 million. The interurban would be bonded at $20,000 per mile. The bonds were offered at a discount of 90 cents on the dollar with subscribers getting an additional 25 percent stock bonus in the BP&J.

Enough money was raised to begin construction to Chenoa. The first section was opened July 1, 1909. Track was completed in Pontiac via Washington Street, south on Division Street, across the Vermillion River to Lincoln Street, then west on Lincoln Street in front of the prison to the Chicago & Alton tracks. Division Street itself didn't cross the river so the company built its own right-of-way and a single-track bridge. The interurban cars now began their runs from this point. The extension was about a mile in length.

Work continued to Chenoa through 1909 and into 1910. All the grading was completed along with the necessary culverts and bridges. The line was ready for the installation of rails and overhead wires, but unfortunately the money ran out. Evidence of this final and never-used roadbed is still in place today, including a culvert in Chenoa.

▲ *In a 1921 postcard view looking south on Main Street from Madison Street in Pontiac, we see the only known view of a city car (borrowed Streator streetcar #33). The Soldiers' Monument stands on the northeast corner of the courthouse square.*—John Rossman/Stephen M. Scalzo collection.

◀ *The courthouse was built in a series of structures in the 1880s. The same view with a number of the same buildings standing on March 13, 2004.*—Jack Sowchin photo

Enter Samuel Insull

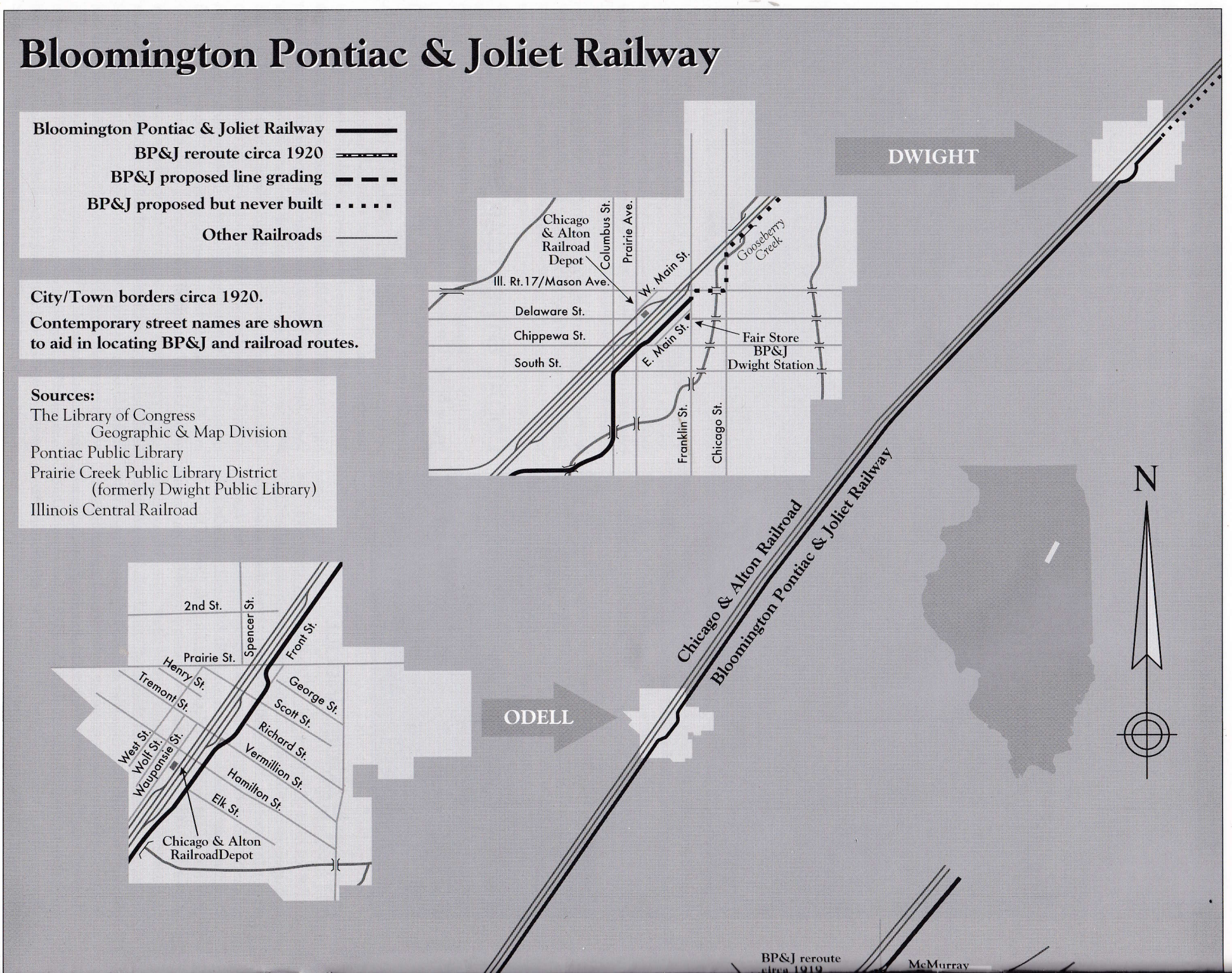
For the year ended June 30, 1910, the BP&J carried 162,144 passengers and produced $22,035 in revenue, an average of 13.59 cents per passenger. However, in February 1911, due to financial difficulties, the Joliet & Southern entered receivership, which most likely drew the BP&J into default as well. As a result, on March 1, 1913, the BP&J along with the Pontiac Light & Water Co. were sold for $750,000 to the Public Service Company of Illinois, a company controlled by Samuel Insull. Insull was building his own utility empire at this time, and the BP&J would wind up having a corporate connection to the other electric railways affiliated with Insull. The Pontiac Light & Water was eventually absorbed into the Northern Illinois Public Service Co. Frank J. Baker, an Insull executive, became the president of the BP&J. Because of unresolved problems with the electrical system, the line was converted to 600-volt direct current during 1913.

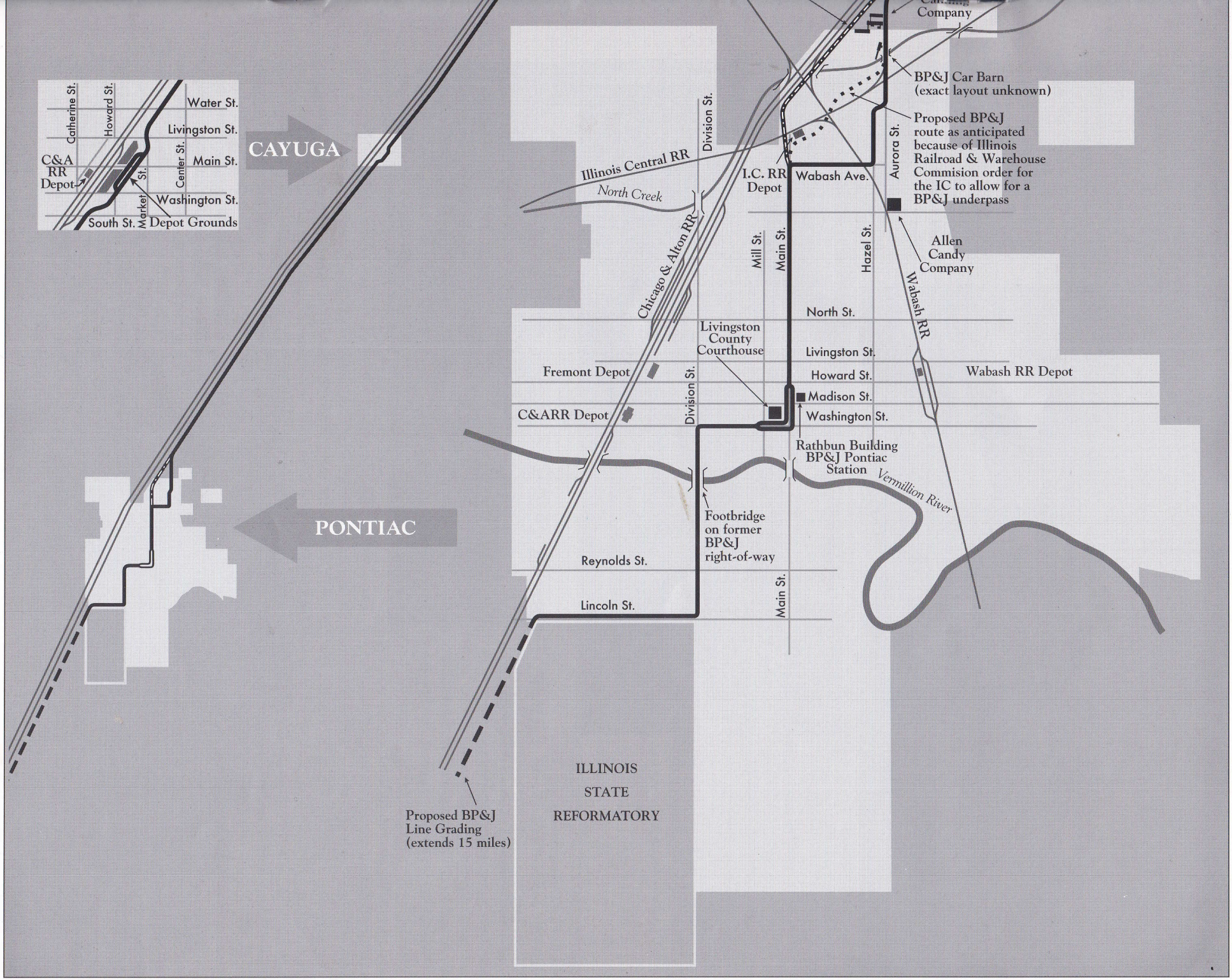
Local Streetcar Service

In July 1913, an old streetcar was purchased in Chicago for use on the BP&J. The car, numbered 301, was put into local service in Pontiac on or about August 1, 1913. The two-mile local run was from the prison on the south side through the business district and up to the BP&J car barn located on the northern edge of the city near the Spartan Foundry and the Illinois Central. The company added a track alongside the car barn to hold this extra car, according to resident John Allison. Except for the business district and the Allen Candy factory, the route was strictly residential. A vintage postcard shows a view of this streetcar alongside the Allen Candy factory. The streetcar, commonly called the "jitney" because of its five-cent fare, certainly made Pontiac one of the smallest cities to have its own streetcar service. It was taken off in the summer of 1922 when the interurban service again covered the local route down to the prison and back.

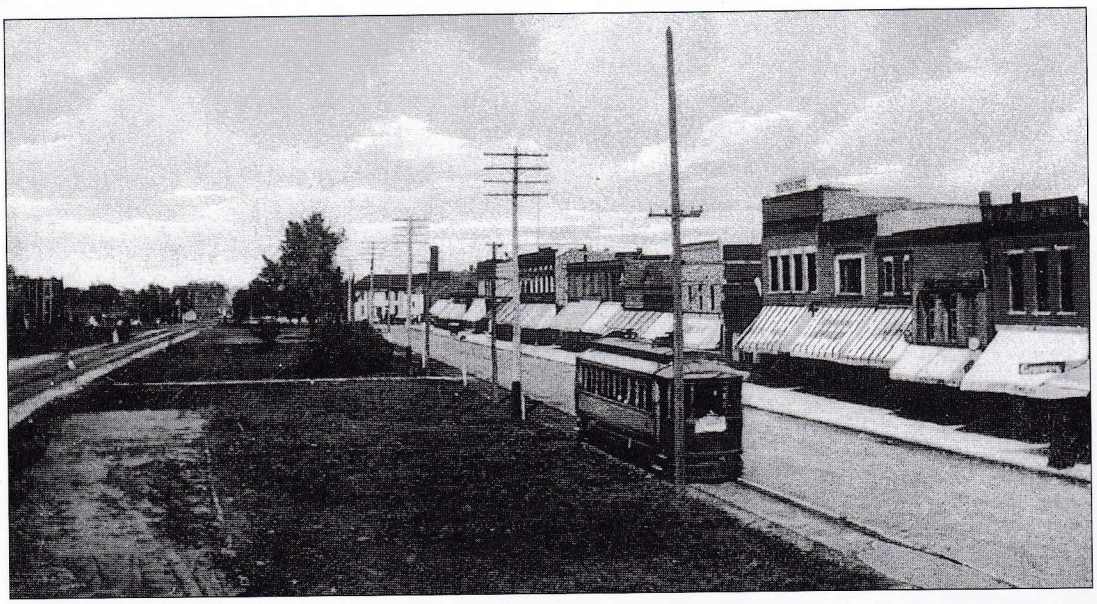
City service as maintained by the interurban cars to the prison used a less frequent schedule, which meant service every two hours and in some cases every three hours. The schedule changed somewhat to provide an early 5:40 a.m. departure and a very late car that did not get back to Pontiac until 1:30 a.m. The streetcar operation could hardly have been profitable. Even in 1917, its best year, it only averaged about 140 passengers per day. In 1921, the last full year of local operation, the average dropped to only 60 passengers per day.

Bloomington Pontiac & Joliet Railway





Stephen M. Scalzo, by a substantial financial contribution, has made it possible to publish this page.



◀ *For the last two blocks of their trip from Pontiac, cars of the BP&J ran along the west side of East Main Street Street parallel to the Chicago & Alton tracks in Dwight. Tickets were sold in the Fair Store at the far end of this block where the tracks abruptly ended at Franklin Street. This historic postcard view is looking northeast on East Main Street from Chippewa Sreet, circa 1911.*—Stephen M. Scalzo Collection.

▶ *The same scene on March 13, 2004. Note how many of the buildings have survived for almost 100 years. The population in Dwight in 2004 is approximately 4,400 people.*—Jack Sowchin photo

Life Along the Bump, Push & Jerk

A presentation about the BP&J to a group of long-term Pontiac residents in the spring of 2000 yielded many colorful and firsthand accounts of the interurban they knew affectionately as the "Bump, Push, and Jerk." Below are some of the recollections:

Marge Kelson's father was employed by the BP&J and would walk the line from Pontiac to Dwight each day inspecting the tracks, and then riding the interurban back to Pontiac.

Harold Bressner recalled a teacher's car breaking down, which forced the teacher to get out and start walking some two miles to a student's house for help. When the teacher saw the lights of the BP&J car coming toward her, she lit a newspaper and used it to flag down the car. The BP&J would stop if flagged down by using a flaming newspaper, a practice common on many interurban railways. (Even into the 1970s and 1980s people would use a flaming newspaper to flag down trains on the South Shore Line.)

Bressner's uncle's farm was next to the tracks with a fence between the tracks and the farm. When the tracks were removed following abandonment, the right-of-way was given to Bressner's uncle. During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration came in and cleared brush off the old right-of-way. His uncle then took over the land and built a new fence on the other side of the former BP&J right-of-way.

Ann Opperman remembered that the BP&J's bridge over the Vermillion River had planks spaced a wide distance apart and kids would dare each other to walk across. Sometimes they didn't get all the way across before a car came, which meant that the unlucky person on the bridge had to stand aside to let the car squeeze by. After one such adventure Mrs. Opperman went across one way but wouldn't come back across on the railroad's bridge. Her mother used to send her on the BP&J to visit her uncle, who would meet them in Dwight for travel over to the nearby town of Gardner.

Sarah Mullaney and others remembered taking the BP&J from Pontiac to Interurban Park for dances and concerts. The concerts ended after dark and took place on Saturday nights. A lawyer by the name of Mr. Simmons lived close to the tracks in Pontiac, and his front porch was a popular place to wait for the next interurban or streetcar. Hubert "Ruby" Boswell remembers playing in the car barn of the BP&J in Pontiac as a boy until they would be chased out by the crew.

An article in the *Pontiac Daily Leader* newspaper describes a Halloween prank in which the BP&J was the victim. A group of local boys applied axle grease to the rails of the BP&J after a car crossed the Interurban Bridge in Pontiac on its way to the turnaround at end of the line. On the way back north the car went across the bridge again then became stuck in a dip just past the bridge, wheels spinning. In the same article, another local resident recalled, "The 'North Side Gang' stalled it near the high school and the 'South Side Gang' stalled it at the interurban bridge. The BP&J was picked on by all."

Equipment on the BP&J

The BP&J owned only four motorcars, two passenger trailers, a freight motor, three miscellaneous cars, and a steam locomotive during the early years. The first car, the "Dwight," was delivered on February 3, 1905. It was a double-truck suburban-type car built by the American Car Co. of St. Louis, Mo., on order 569. It was 41 feet 8 inches long and 8 feet 7 inches wide. It seated 40 passengers and rested on Brill 27E1 trucks with 34-inch wheels and had a weight of 58,000 pounds. The electrical equipment originally consisted of four GE 604 motors, later replaced with GE 605 75-horsepower motors, an improved version of the same motor. The car was equipped with two T33 cylinder platform controllers that had five running notches by tapping the "compensator" (transformer) at 400, 500, 600, 700 or 800 volts. The car was equipped for either alternating or direct current operation. The only additions required for direct current operation were one DC switch, one commutating switch, and five rheostats.

The second car, the "Pontiac," was delivered on July 19, 1905. It was similar to the Dwight and was built as a demonstrator model in 1904. Exhibited at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 by its manufacturer, the "Pontiac" was described as the finest and most modern interurban car of its time. The two cars were numbered 201 and 202, respectively, by the Fishers.

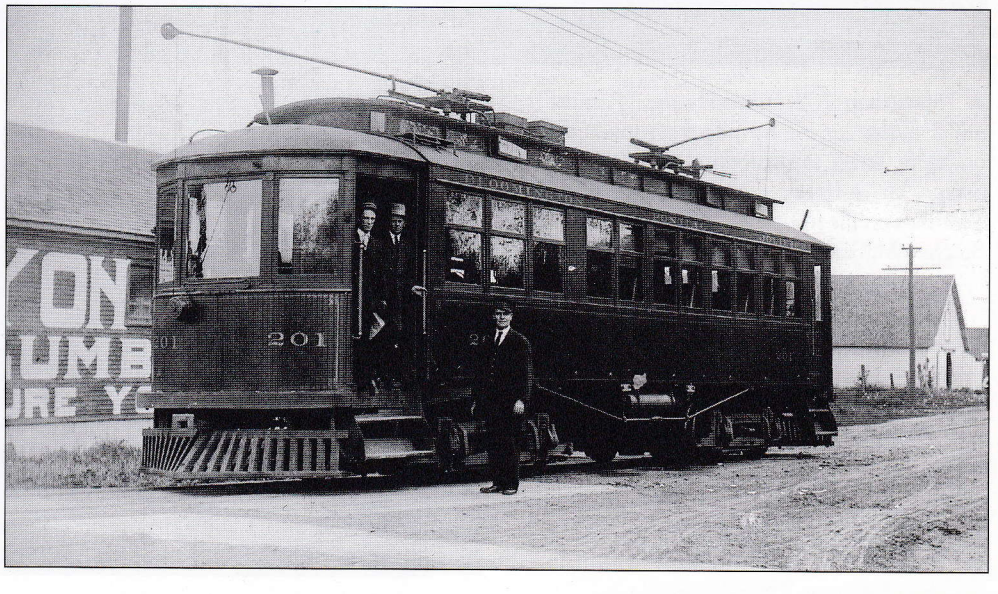
The BP&J purchased two trailers, 251 and 252, in June 1908. According to the best information available they were former New York City elevated cars built about 1880, with a length of 45 feet, seating for 40 people, and a weight of about 16,000 pounds.

The BP&J purchased the city streetcar, 301, from the Chicago Railways Co. in July 1913. It was an old relic built by the American Car Co. in 1895 for the Citizens Railway of St. Louis. This streetcar passed into the hands of successor United Railways of St. Louis before being acquired in 1906 by the Chicago Union Traction Co. where it became car 3866, then Chicago Railways car 3866. This streetcar was 36 feet 2 inches long, 8 feet 8 inches wide, 12 feet 2 inches high, and it seated 36. It rested on St. Louis 21 trucks, with two Westinghouse 56 50-horsepower motors and K11 controls.

No information is available on the freight motor purchased in 1908 or the steam locomotive used in construction and for a few years afterward on work trains. The steam locomotive is believed to have been a second-hand purchase.

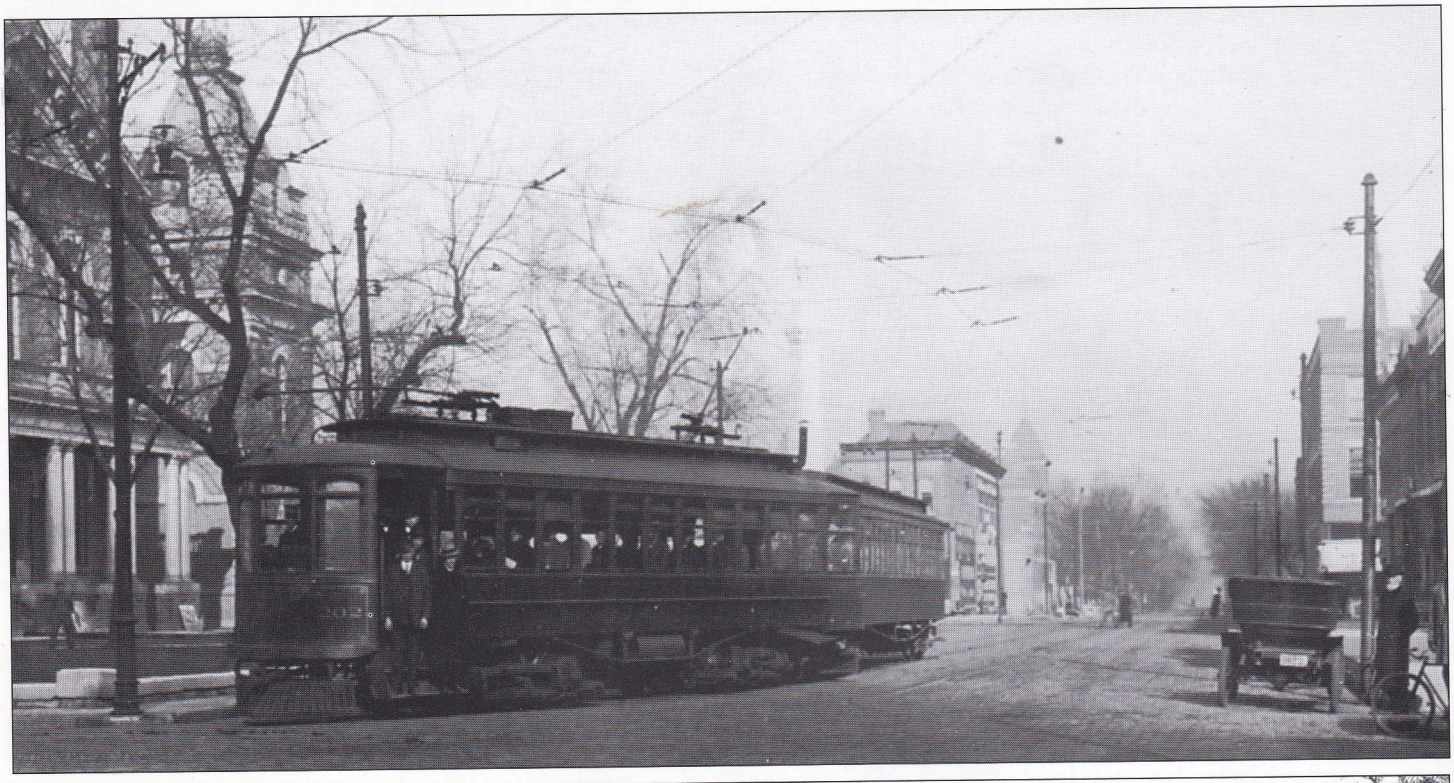
In 1921, the BP&J leased a single-truck city car, 33, from the Public Service Company's Streator lines. The car, built by McGuire-Cummings in 1912, was 30 feet long and 8 feet 2 inches wide, with a capacity of 30 people and a weight of 20,000 pounds. This car proved unsatisfactory for the BP&J and was returned. Rent was $1 per day for this car.

◄ *Shortly after the memorable blizzard of January 12-13, 1918, car 202 is loading passengers at the Dwight station. The area was buried in snow with drifts up to 20 feet over the railroad tracks at Cayuga and temperatures down to 20 degrees below zero. Pontiac was isolated for 60 hours and the BP&J did not operate for several days.*—Paul Stringham Collection from Stephen M. Scalzo



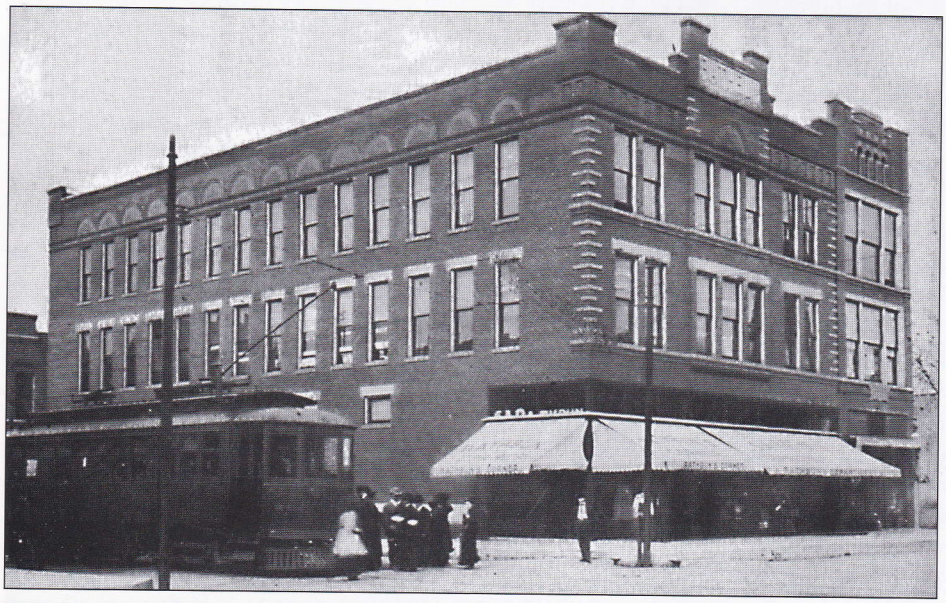
► *Life along the BP&J was relaxed enough that the crew of car 201 could pose in Odell on July 6, 1910 during the middle of their southbound trip on Front Street at Vermillion Street. We do not know the identity of the crewmen; however, the roster of employees included A. W. Lehmann, a motorman who appears in a number of photos, Charles Anderson, Marinus Swanson, John Abnet, E. E. Weist, Charles Horton, Fay Horton and Leslie Clark. The population in Odell in 2004 is approximately 1,000 people.*—Charles Goethe Collection from Stephen M. Scalzo

▶ *The "Pontiac" was delivered to the BP&J on July 19, 1905 and this occasion with the ladies appears to have been taken shortly after the car arrived on the property.*—Krambles-Peterson Archive



▲ *Interurban 202 (formerly the "Pontiac") and a trailer car are turning from southbound on Main Street to westbound on Washington Street, circa 1910, with conductor Marius Swanson on the front step.*—The Daily Leader/ Stephen M. Scalzo collection

▶ *The same street corner on March 13, 2004.*—Jack Sowchin photo



▲ *What appear to be the "Dwight is making the same turn from Main Street into Washington Street in this postcard view which is looking east from Mill Street. The building on the south side of Washington Street were torn down in the 1970s.*—Stephen M. Scalzo collection

◀ *Postcard scene of the Rathbun Building on the northeast corner of Main and Madison streets, which is also the northeast corner of the courthouse square, was the location of the passenger station in Pontiac.*—Stephen M. Scalzo collection

◀ *The Rathbun Building, as well as the adjacent, buildings were still standing on March 13, 2004. The current occupant is the Encore Shop, a J. C. Penny catalog merchant, and The Apple Tree restaurant is in the building next store. The top two floors of both buildings are vacant.*—Jack Sowchin photo

Steam Railroads Operating in the BP&J Territory

The Chicago & Mississippi Railroad was built in 1853–1854. The first passenger train through Pontiac and Dwight ran on July 4, 1854. The railroad brought in people, and hotels and businesses soon began arriving in town as well. The first bank was established in 1866 and the Pontiac Woolen Mills began in 1867. The Chicago & Mississippi eventually became the Chicago & Alton with service from Chicago to Bloomington, Springfield, and St. Louis.

Soon other railroads came. The Fairbury, Pontiac, & Northwestern Railroad Co., chartered on March 7, 1867, started construction from Streator in 1869 and on March 22, 1872, completed its 30-mile line from Streator through Pontiac to Forrest. It was acquired by the Chicago & Paducah Railway Co., then in 1880 by the Wabash, St. Louis, & Pacific Railway, and finally in 1889 by the Wabash Railroad.

The Illinois Central Railroad Co. on November 1, 1878, completed a 70-mile branch from Otto (4.5 miles from Kankakee) to Pontiac and Minonk.

In 1869–1870, the Chicago & Alton built a branch to Streator from Dwight. Facilities at Dwight included a small roundhouse. In 1881, the Indiana, Illinois, & Iowa Railroad completed its line between Kankakee, Dwight, and Streator, which is now owned by the Norfolk Southern with CSX trackage rights following the Conrail breakup.

The Keeley Institute, a rehabilitation hospital for alcoholics founded in 1880 by Leslie E. Keeley, was established in Streator. The institute prospered beyond all expectations, and the village increased by 700 people. In 1919, the federal government bought the Keeley buildings and the old Livingston hotel. They are now a Veterans Administration hospital.

There was one large factory in Streator, the Spencer Haypress Co., founded in 1885 by J. A. Spencer. He invented a successful hay press, but the factory eventually closed in 1928.

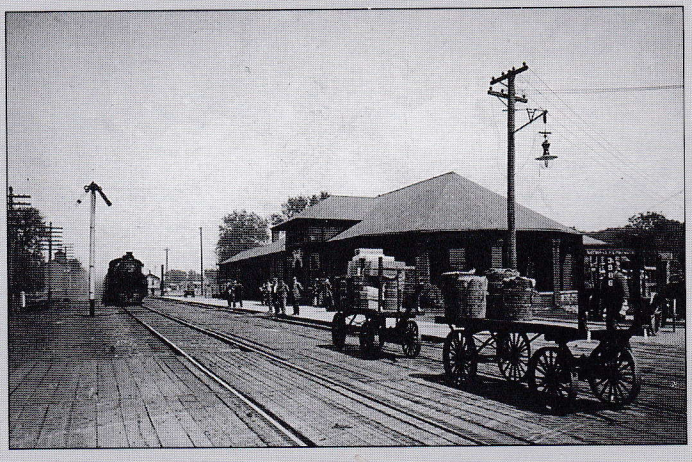
The Wabash Railroad ended its Forrest–Pontiac passenger train on April 7, 1929 but offered mixed train service until December 6, 1942. Norfolk & Western bought the railroad in 1964 and tore up the branch in the 1970s.

The Illinois Central discontinued the Minonk passenger train on November 1, 1925 and the mixed train in January 1942. The branch between Saxony and Pontiac, some 21 miles, was abandoned on November 15, 1977, by successor line Illinois Central Gulf, which also abandoned the 12-mile segment between Pontiac and Flanagan, on January 13, 1982.

On May 31, 1947, the merger of the Chicago & Alton into the Gulf Mobile & Ohio was formally consummated after an almost two year period of effective control following the announcement in April 1945 by the GM&O of a plan of reorganization of the Alton. The Illinois Central acquired the Gulf Mobile & Ohio on August 10, 1972, forming the Illinois Central Gulf. On April 28, 1987, ICG sold off the former Alton lines between Joliet and East St. Louis as well as the line from Kansas City, Mo., to Springfield and Alton, Ill., to the Chicago Missouri & Western, a subsidiary of the Venango River Corp. Eleven months later on April 1, 1988, the CM&W declared bankruptcy. Venango River also owned the Chicago South Shore & South Bend from September 1984 to December 1989. On November 8, 1989, the Southern Pacific, through its subsidiary SPCSL, acquired the East St. Louis to Joliet line through Bloomington and Dwight from the estate of the CM&W. On September 12, 1996, Union Pacific acquired the Southern Pacific.

In Dwight, the New York Central (later Penn Central, Conrail and in 2004 Norfolk Southern with CSX trackage rights) terminated its passenger train to Kankakee on June 29, 1930. They had a motorcar on this run in 1928–1929. The New York Central discontinued its mixed train to Streator and Ladd on January 17, 1933.

The Chicago & Alton had a motorcar (usually M17 with trailer 11) on train number 62 and 63 between Dwight and Peoria until January 1932. The Chicago & Alton successor Gulf Mobile & Ohio offered mixed train service over the 70 miles between Dwight and Washington, Ill., until December 1951. This line was abandoned by the Illinois Central Gulf shortly after it acquired the Gulf Mobile & Ohio in 1972. Illinois Central Gulf returned to its original name of Illinois Central following a series of changes of ownership that culminated in the Canadian National Railroad acquiring the Illinois Central in 1998.



▲ *Two historic views of the Chicago & Alton, the steam road competitor of the BP&J. In the view on the left a train is southbound approaching the station in Odell while in a view on the right a southbound train is approaching the station in Pontiac.*—Krambles-Peterson Archive

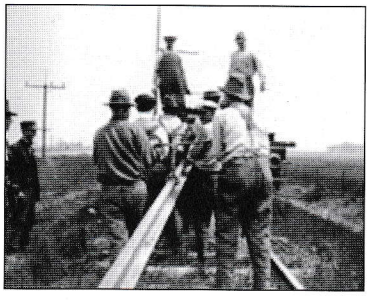
▶ *The "Pontiac" is changing ends on Washington Street just west of Mill Street off of the southwest corner of the courthouse square in Pontiac, circa 1905. The building in the background remains in 2004 and has been extensively remodeled in its interior for use as Dad's Magic Frozen Custard Shop. The population in Pontiac in 2004 is approximately 11,400 people. The principal employers in Pontiac and Dwight are the R. R. Donnelley printing company and state prisons.*—Paul Stringham Collection from Stephen M. Scalzo

BP&J Finale

Being just a rather isolated short line in an essentially rural territory, traffic was hard to come by. At best the BP&J was a limited operation with profits in its two best years of just a little over $4,000, hardly justifying the capital investment. However, the BP&J was an important factor in the lives of people living this area.

When the BP&J started in 1905, there were few automobiles and dusty paths served as the only roads. Things changed when the roads were paved, which spelled doom for this spunky interurban. Yet the BP&J provided good service to Livingston County for two decades and contributed to the growth and commercial success of the online communities.

The BP&J transported only 20,500 people in 1924, compared to more than 182,000 in 1916, a huge decrease. Trucks siphoned off freight traffic as well. On August 19, 1925, the BP&J asked the Public Utility Commission for permission to discontinue service since it was clearly no longer needed. The commission agreed and gave its approval on Tuesday, November 24, 1925. On the following Saturday, November 28, 1925, the last car left Pontiac at 5:15 p.m. and returned at 7:30 p.m. Interurban personnel were given other positions with the Public Service Company after the trolley pole was lowered for the last time.



◀ *The termination of service on the BP&J was announced by the Superintendent, Mrs. Agnes E. Sells. The last car operated on November 25, 1925. Based on this photo it appears that the salvaging of the line awaited the warmer weather of the spring or summer of 1926.*—Pontiac Historical Society from Tom Burke

Streetcar number 301 was burned in 1924, and the others were burned after the 1925 abandonment. Grainy photographs from the occasion show a man tossing a flaming rag onto the Pontiac. The car was evidently covered in some kind of accelerant since it went up in flames in the next picture.

A steam locomotive was used one more time on the BP&J, this time for salvage operations performed by the Hyman-Michaels Co. of Chicago. The company removed the rails, placing them onto a flatcar pulled behind the locomotive. Decades later the same salvage company would perform this unpleasant task on the BP&J's one-time sister interurban, the North Shore Line.

Remarkably, regular passenger train service is still available right along the route of the BP&J between Pontiac and Dwight with Amtrak trains *Ann Rutledge* and *The State House* making two stops daily in each town over the Union Pacific tracks. The Amtrak timetables for the fall of 2000 show a 17-minute running time to cover the 20-mile distance between stations in Dwight and Pontiac versus 55 minutes for the BP&J, according to the company's 1921 timetable. Of course, Amtrak travels nonstop between the two destinations, and the BP&J made seven stops in between.

CHICAGO & ALTON RAILROAD
Service Comparison

	Southbound			Northbound		
	1900	1907	1911	1900	1907	1911
DWIGHT	6	6	7	6	5	7
ODELL	3	3	4	3	3	4
CAYUGA	0	1	2	2	1	2
PONTIAC	7	6	7	8	5	8
OCOYA	2	1	2	2	1	2
CHENOA	7	6	7	8	5	6

Chicago & Alton data provided by Art Peterson.

CHICAGO & ALTON RAILROAD February-March, 1907

Midnight Special 11	Palace Express 9	7	23	The Alton Limited 3	PS Express 1		The Alton Limited 2	PS Express 4	Palace Express 6	Midbight Special 8	24
1:43a	11:25p	8:00p	4:55p	1:15p	11:17a	DWIGHT	3:05p	5:55p	3:50a	5:54a	11:10a
	11:40p		5:09p		11:31a	ODELL		5:42p	3:34a		10:48a
			5:18p			CAYUGA					10:38a
2:18a	Midnight	8:28p	5:28p	1:42p	11:48a	PONTIAC	2:36p	5:26p	3:14a	5:28a	10:26a
			5:38p			OCOYA					10:12a
2:36a	2:20a	8:45p	5:47p	1:58p	12:02p	CHENOA	2:20p	5:08p	2:54a	5:14a	10:03a

◀ *Division Street in Pontiac did not cross the Vermillion River, but the BP&J did on the only bridge across the river. As a result the railroad did a brisk local business from residents of south Pontiac who wanted to come into town to shop and people going to the "reformatory" which still is located on the south edge of Pontiac. The opening of the new Vermillion Street bridge, two blocks west of Division St. to automobile traffic in September 1925 affected BP&J's remaining local traffic, one of the final acts that led to the abandonment of all rail operations on November 25, 1925. In 2004 a suspension bridge carries a pedestrian footpath across the Vermillion River. The bridge is anchored on the BP&J's bridge abutments.*—Jack Sowchin photo

Remains of the BP&J Today

The roadbed of the abandoned BP&J still exists in many long stretches where it parallels the UP on the east, with the famous and former Route 66 and busy I-55 all just a short distance away. Concrete bridge abutments, culverts, fills, and cuts stand out in many places and are evidence of the unusually high construction standards used in building this line. Concrete abutments for the old Interurban Bridge are still in place on the south bank of the Vermillion River in Pontiac where they now help support a pedestrian suspension bridge. The best way to view these remains is by looking out of the windows from the southeast side of an Amtrak train passing through the territory.

◀ *South of Dwight the former BP&J bridge abutments have been put to use by a farmer to cross a creek. New steel stringers and wood bridge floor were reinstalled by the farmer to gain access between fields on both side of the creek. Hard surfaced roads cross the adjacent Union Pacific tracks which are in the foreground. March 13, 2004.* —Jack Sowchin photo

◀ *On March 13, 2004, Amtrak train number 22, the Texas Eagle, is approaching Pontiac from the south. If you were riding on the southeast side of this train you would have the best view of the remains of the BP&J between Chenoa and Dwight. Just east of this bridge is a partly collapsed concrete arch bridge designed to carry interurban trains that never came.*—Jack Sowchin photo

Area Train Service Today

As previously described, Amtrak offers several trains daily over the Union Pacific (former Chicago & Alton) line with stops in both Dwight and Pontiac. The state of Illinois is funding track, signal, and highway grade crossing protection improvements to create a high-speed rail passenger corridor between Chicago and St. Louis. Construction is planned for completion in 2004 with testing to be completed in 2005 before high-speed (120 mph) operations can commence. Mixed trains returned to this area for a brief period in the form of multiple Amtrak express boxcars in consists with the usual coaches and sleepers until budget cuts eliminated the express business.

Union Pacific runs long freight trains with a grab bag of equipment and cars on this line, sending higher priority traffic over the former Chicago & North Western lines to Chicago. A Union Pacific wayfreight works the online customers (mostly grain elevators and a farm service dealer) from Bloomington early in the morning with a faded Southern Pacific caboose attached for switching moves. In Dwight, the Union Pacific interchanges with Norfolk Southern and CSX.

Driving southwest on I-55, one passes over bridges that once spanned the now-abandoned steam lines, which have mostly disappeared into brush or been plowed back into farm fields. It is a far different railroad scene in north central Illinois in 2004 than it was when the BP&J operated over eight decades ago.

Laura Sellmyer of the Pontiac Historical Society provided photographs and other materials and hosted a meeting of people who remembered the BP&J. Norman Carlson, Jim D. Daluga, Therese Rose Elizabeth Schilling and Grant E. Brougher contributed research to this article.